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Author(s): Albert D. Biderman

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# EFFECTS OF COMMUNIST INDOCTRINATION ATTEMPTS: SOME COMMENTS BASED ON AN AIR FORCE PRISONER-OF-WAR STUDY\*

ALBERT D. BIDERMAN

*Bureau of Social Science Research, Inc.  
Washington, D. C.*

Much effort in the study of Communist attempts to exploit Air Force prisoners of war has been devoted to demonstrating the inappropriateness of some prevalent notions about what occurred in the internment places in North Korea and Communist China, and why. It is strongly suspected that the languages and thought-habits of our culture have a significant heritage from diablerie which accounts for the way in which events such as these are misconceived. As with most things in our culture, however, diablerie has become secularized. The modern term is "brainwashing" (1).

"What we call brainwashing," says a prolific writer on the subject, "is an elaborate ritual of systematic indoctrination, conversion and self-accusation used to change non-Communists into submissive followers of the party" (13, p. 27).

According to the Associated Press,

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"Brainwashing . . . destroys the will, erodes reason, banishes hope. It puts a man in hell and holds him there with the gnawing guilt that he has signed a pact with the Devil."\*\*

Stories about prisoners of war seem to have had special news value if demonolatry — worship of communism, in this instance — could be implied (17, 5). The prevailing view was that "brainwashing" converted prisoners into temporary or permanent Communists. Such a conversion did not occur in the case of any Air Force prisoner of war, however. In fact, in no case was this extreme even remotely approached — not even in those few cases in which total conversion was seriously attempted.

## RELEVANT CRITERIA OF INDOCTRINATION

Indoctrination is not an all-or-nothing affair in which there is either total conversion or no effect. Consequently, in the study of the experiences of Air Force prisoners, an attempt was made to evaluate the effects of indoctrination in terms of a number of criteria relating to specific responsibilities of the Air Force. Among the questions raised were the following:

1. Were any returnees made "security risks" because of Communist indoctrination, in the sense of being potential agents of Communism?
2. Were any returnees "publicity risks" by virtue of Communist indoctrination; i.e., would they

\*\*Associated Press feature datelined March 28, 1954.

make statements or behave in such a way as to bring discredit upon themselves, the Air Force or the nation?

3. Had indoctrination affected the ability of any to perform their duties as members of the Air Force or as citizens?
4. Did any act contrary to the interests of their country because of sympathy with the enemy's cause which had been induced?
5. Were personal problems of adjustment created by Communist indoctrination?
6. How lasting were indoctrination effects likely to be?
7. What could be inferred from these cases regarding the vulnerability of Air Force personnel, and Americans, generally, to Communist indoctrination attempts?

#### DATA

This report presents a few of the considerations from the Air Force study which conflict with widespread impressions of the effects of the Chinese Communists' attempts to indoctrinate our prisoners of war.

The primary data for the over-all POW study were transcripts of interviews with each of the 220 members of the Air Force who were repatriated by the Chinese Communists in 1953. Each former prisoner of war was interviewed within a few days after his release, and again within several weeks after his return to the continental United States. These interviews were conducted primarily for intelligence and administrative purposes and had various deficiencies as research data. Among other information relevant to the present paper, the transcripts included repatriates' descriptions of Chinese Communist indoctrination efforts and materials, statements of their opinions of communism and of their

captors, and their recommendations for preparing military personnel for the event of capture. About twenty of these repatriates were also interviewed by members of the research staff explicitly for the purposes of the study, however. In addition, a mail questionnaire, which the repatriates were asked to return anonymously, was completed by 90 per cent of the men (20, pp. 139-143).

More elaborate data were available from the 15 additional Air Force prisoners who were detained in China until 1955. For these cases, research teams in which the writer participated made detailed observations and interviews beginning within a day of their release and continuing through the first week of their return. This was followed after an interval of several weeks by the assignment of the men to the research organization for intensive interviews, tests and informal conversations with research personnel over a period of from two weeks to one month (14).

Some of the interpretations in the present paper relating to individual reactions are based exclusively on the cases interviewed explicitly for the purposes of the research.

It is important to emphasize that this paper is based upon a direct study of Air Force cases only. The Air Force returnees as a group are quite different from those of the other services with respect to background characteristics (age, rank, education, etc.) and with respect to experiences while captive (20, pp. 141-143).

An additional caution is that, even under ideal circumstances, behavior which is a matter of intense public moral evaluation is difficult to study. Many of the questions raised rely on the retrospection, and worse, on the retrospective introspection of subjects in a very different situation. The success of efforts to keep situations in

which the data were collected devoid of threat was doubtless limited.

Case for case, however, the Air Force returnees were the most intensively studied of all POWs. In part, this was due to the small number of men involved; in part, to the significance attached to the problem by the Air Force and to the priority it gave research (14).

#### INDOCTRINATION:

##### AMOUNT AND EFFECTS

*Amount of Indoctrination.* One scale in terms of which an attempt was made to rate indoctrination was the notion of "how much" of the enemy's doctrine was "absorbed" or "accepted." While some discriminations could be made among the available population in terms of this kind of scale, it did not provide much of an answer to the questions regarded as significant to the Air Force. Among these returnees were a few individuals who had "absorbed," and even some who had "accepted," a considerable amount of the doctrine to which they had been exposed, yet who constituted little or no problem to themselves, the Air Force, or the nation. On the other hand, a comparatively slight "amount" of indoctrination may be sufficient for disastrous outcomes, as in the case of some Army personnel who declined repatriation (8, 15). A number of key considerations limit the significance of the "amount" or "scope" of indoctrination.

*Conflicts with American Loyalties.* The significance of indoctrination to many of the concerns listed involves the degree to which the individual is led to act or think in conflict with his own society. The effects of indoctrination on various Air Force returnees demonstrated the extent to which the victim of Communist indoctrination efforts can respond selectively to the content of the indoctrination and ab-

sorb material which causes no fundamental conflict with pre-existing beliefs and loyalties. Thus, for example, indoctrination did evoke in some of the POWs considerable concern about the Negro problem in the United States, sympathy with the plight of the industrial worker in 18th-Century England as portrayed by Dickens or Engels, or a "love of peace." So long as the individual did not accept the Communist view of the implications of these matters, the attitude changes were not such as to present any great conflict with American ideals. In no case was there evidence that any returned Air Force POW accepted doctrine which he viewed as conflicting with fundamental American ideals, nor was there evidence that the fundamental allegiance of the individuals to the United States was weakened.

This does not mean that the effects of indoctrination have not created conflicts between the men and the society. There were potential ideological conflicts created of which the men were not aware at the time they were interviewed. An indication of one conflict was the feeling among several that the political commissar system would be a valuable innovation in the U. S. Air Force. The degree to which the returnee is aware of the conflict between attitudes he has come to hold and fundamental American ideals is a further key consideration in evaluating effects of indoctrination.

*Adjustment to Expectations of Others.* Another significant basis of potential conflict resides in the very special attitude that others have to the returnees as persons known to have been subject to Communist indoctrination. Returnees were subjects of suspicion. The service, the press, the public, their friends, and their families all scrutinized them to determine what effects Communist indoctrination might have had. As targets of

such scrutiny, the *source* of attitudes the men hold becomes significant as well as the actual content and its consistency with American principles. What would be perfectly acceptable manifestations of attitude on the part of the ordinary serviceman can excite suspicion or alarm when displayed by a returnee from Communist captivity. An example of this is the agnostic position of one of the returnees which, while varying hardly at all from the state of his religious beliefs prior to capture, produced a violent reaction in many who met him after his return.

Whether or not serious problems arise from the attitudes taken toward these men depends upon a number of factors. Particularly important is the awareness by the returnee of the nature of the scrutiny to which he is being subjected, his ability and motivation to adjust to this scrutiny by talking and behaving with care, and his ability to tolerate suspicions without active feelings of resentment. The general impression derived from these interviews is that, to the extent that the returnees at the moment of their release were not already prepared to deal appropriately with the way in which others regarded them, they quickly became sensitive and intelligently responsive to this scrutiny. One pilot reported his successful adjustment to the anxious scrutiny of his home-town peers. After several days, one of his old acquaintances blurted: "Damn it, you're not brainwashed. You're the same mean bastard you always were."

*Awareness of Coercion.* The feeling that the possession of some attitude by a returnee has a different significance than its possession by any one else is not wholly irrational. The aspect of Communist indoctrination which is most puzzling to many is not so much the false nature of the beliefs that are accepted as it is the apparent failure

of those who have been indoctrinated successfully to give sensible consideration to the circumstances through which they were brought to accept communistic beliefs. It is felt that torture, threats, and solitary confinement should engender hatred of, not sympathy with, the beliefs of the perpetrators. The idea that there must be something mysterious about the brainwashing process stems from the failure of the behavior of some former victims of communist coercive indoctrination to accord with common sense in this respect (9). The degree to which the returnee recognized and responded appropriately to the coercive nature of the attempts to indoctrinate him is a further significant basis for rating indoctrination attempts.

In none of the Air Force cases was there a failure to be conscious of the nature of the communist attempts to manipulate thinking. In cases where arguments did have an emotional or logical appeal, there remained the recognition that a situation in which one was under coercion and able to hear the arguments of only one side was not one in which to make final decisions about the validity of ideological arguments. In some instances, where a communist indoctrinator was able to portray himself as a sincere, honest, and objective person, and in which a relatively permissive atmosphere prevailed, some impressions temporarily favorable to the Chinese Communists were created. Thus, for example, indoctrination of prisoners isolated for medical treatment in hospitals was particularly likely to have an effect.

*Indoctrination and Collaboration.* The effects of indoctrination have somewhat different significance as they operate while a man is a prisoner and after his return. So long as the man remains a prisoner, successful indoctrination of him by his captors affects

U. S. interests only to the extent that it leads to collaboration with the enemy, such as the prisoner's giving intelligence information, making propaganda statements or appearances, declining repatriation, etc.

One of the most striking observations in the Air Force study was the lack of correspondence between the extent to which prisoners were favorably impressed by ideological doctrines of their captors, and the degree to which they would go along with their captors in other areas.\* For example the pilot who on most counts was rated as the Air Force returnee most affected by communist ideological indoctrination, resisted giving a false confession for a longer time than did any other POW who was pressured and who eventually complied. Another officer, at a time when he was reacting quite sympathetically to communist dogma, effected a difficult escape. A third individual for whom many communist ideological arguments had appeared quite sensible was the most overtly defiant of "defendants" in public trial of Air Force personnel — overt defiance being an exceedingly rare occurrence in communist public trials. It is to be expected that men who take ideological matters seriously would be among those who acted most in accordance with a patriotic commitment.

Some of these cases showed the extent to which there can be "acceptance" of doctrine on the intellectual level without a corresponding emotional identification with that doctrine or any tendency to act in accordance with it. A pilot who was sold the idea that the Communists had a legitimate claim to Formosa, for example, could nonetheless be willing to shoot-up any attempt they made to exert it.

#### *Duration of Indoctrination Effects.*

\*The same conclusion was reached in a study of Army prisoners of war (18).

From the Communists' standpoint, a weakness of the methods which they employ to indoctrinate prisoners of war is the highly temporary effects they obtain (2, p. 17; 9, pp. 164-165, 174). Indoctrination achieved some success only in a very few cases of individuals who were held for prolonged periods in complete isolation. The success was limited to the period during which the individual was being subjected to intensive indoctrination efforts and when these efforts were not contaminated by what the prisoner interpreted as attempts to use him for an ulterior purpose, e.g., by efforts to elicit intelligence information, "confessions," or the like. As soon as such prisoners were put together, they began to "straighten each other out."

#### EVALUATION OF COMMUNIST INDOCTRINATION EFFORTS

The content of communist indoctrination is based on decades of testing and elaboration by a world-wide movement organized for propaganda and proselytization. The Chinese Communists have been particularly enterprising in developing ways of "reforming thoughts." The political indoctrination of POWs is a central tenet of Chinese Communist military doctrine (5). However, it does not appear that any Air Force POW encountered communist prisoner-indoctrination efforts in their most intensive and effective forms.

Even at its best, indoctrination does not appear to have been a completely preplanned, systematically executed affair. Extensive use was made of indoctrination materials and themes which could easily have been predicted to produce a violent negative reaction in almost any American and which, in fact, ruined much of the favorable effect the Communists sometimes had previously achieved. An example was a film shown to one group of Air Force prisoners in which nuns



and priests are portrayed producing submachine guns from under their robes and mowing down numerous innocent men, women, and children. The "boy meets girl, boy chucks girl for tractor" novels are another (4).

In general, considering the persistence and unscrupulousness of the Communists, and the complete control they could exercise over prisoners, it can be said that they achieved far less success than would be expected. It has been proved, both historically and experimentally, that the skillful exploitation of a highly controlled environment can be used to convince individuals of the validity of a great variety of false things, nonexistent heresies and witches, as well as communism, being examples (7; 9, pp. 118-122).

While indoctrination, as practiced by the Chinese Communists in these cases was a deliberate procedure which had achieved some effectiveness, the Communists generally negated the success they could have been able to achieve. Much of the failure is due to their ignorance of American ideals, the attitudes of Americans, and the true facts about life in the United States. In addition, attempts at indoctrination through coercion proved to be particularly unsuccessful, especially in the long run (3, 16).

#### ABILITIES OF U. S. AIR FORCE PERSONNEL TO WITHSTAND INDOCTRINATION

There appears to be a widespread impression that American prisoners generally were pushovers for Chinese Communist indoctrinators (12). Impressions gained from Air Force cases is the reverse. Although only impressionistic judgments can be made on this, the evidence seems convincing that, in comparison with people of other nationalities whom Chinese and other Communist captors have at-

tempted to manipulate in a similar fashion, American military personnel were strikingly resistant to Communist indoctrination efforts.

*Returnee Dissatisfaction with Own Political "Ignorance."* Much of the impression of the effectiveness of the Chinese attempts is traceable to the testimony of the returnees themselves, however. Many of them were of the opinion that they and their fellow POWs were ill-prepared to cope with communist indoctrinators, that they were embarrassed and insecure when confronted with communist argumentation and found how inconsistent, unarticulated, and seemingly poorly supported were their own political and philosophical beliefs. They were dismayed when confronted with Communist personnel who appeared to have considerably more information on American governmental structure than they themselves had. They were extremely unhappy to find they had difficulty in refuting logically some of the arguments of their captors. The majority of our returnees were of the opinion that the Armed Forces should devote more time and effort to political education.

*Not Ignorance but Implicit Political Faith.* Nevertheless, the impressions of the unusually intense resistance of American personnel to indoctrination attempts are believed to be true, despite this returnee testimony. In fact, these feelings of weakness and inadequacy of the former POWs may be interpreted as reflections of their basic strengths in this regard. They are manifestations of some fundamental aspects of American political temperament which makes for peculiar invulnerability to ideological indoctrination.

It is not maintained here that ignorance is strength in this regard, but rather that only the "strong" can afford this ignorance. Much of the in-

articulateness of these men regarding their own basic beliefs and outlook is attributable to the fact that these are unquestioned and implicit articles of faith. These beliefs were never challenged in their lives to the point where the individual had to examine them critically, to construct rationalizations of them, to adopt an articulated ideology. Since Sumner's work, at least, it has been too "old hat" to be worth mentioning that it is precisely the unarticulated, unrationalized, implicitly accepted beliefs that have the greatest "binding power" (19, p. 60). Most of the American prisoners of war had an unquestioned belief in their own superiority, the superiority of things American, and feelings of rightness and wrongness which the Chinese never were able to alter fundamentally, despite the inability of most POWs to make cogently articulate defense of their feelings or to counter logically some of the arguments of their captors. The POWs might have been much more vulnerable had they had a highly rationalized ideology, as for example, did the Nazi troops who as POWs were relatively easy marks for both Western and Soviet political indoctrinators.

*The Strength of "Anti-ideology."* To the extent that our men did have an ideology, one of its basic principles was "anti-ideology." The most common attitude was not only relatively apolitical, it was *anti-political*. The almost universal way of referring to Communist indoctrination and indoctrination matter was "all that political crap." (It was "crap" not only because it was Communist, but because it was political. The same attitude is the bane of the Information and Education Officer in our Armed Forces.) The Chinese Communists attempted to make the political important to the prisoner by linking it to the satisfaction of most everyday

needs and, sometimes, to survival itself. This was generally successful in making it instrumentally but not intrinsically important. It became merely "crap" you had to put up with, for most.

It should not be concluded that this is the ideal basis for resistance, either practically or normatively. In the face of a more intelligent attack than that of the Chinese Communists, such a defense might prove vulnerable. A major vulnerability is that many possessed a general set of attitudes which is inconsistent with those that have been sketched. One of these inconsistent attitudes is that the political, the ideological, the philosophical are indeed "higher" things about which one should really feel concerned, even though one is not. Practically all returnees expressed some feeling of having been delinquent in not having read or studied more about politics and ideology, and a few denounced the services for not having done enough to acquaint them with such matters. There were some who had this attitude strongly enough to "study" actively under communist tutelage.

Like most attitudes, this one is situationally relevant. That is, in most ordinary life situations for most Americans the attitude that politics and ideology is a lot of unimportant nonsense is socially facilitated; but there are a few situations in which almost all feel that a more solemn attitude toward such matters is appropriate. So, for example, a large number of these men quite solemnly chose to risk death rather than dishonor self or nation. As prisoners of war, men found themselves in situations which they, as individuals or small groups, had to define for themselves. Where the situation became defined as one to which the solemn, rather than the "crap" attitude to political indoctrination was appropriate, indoctrination



was facilitated. Variations in what the Chinese did and many chance factors, as well as the predispositions of the individuals involved, seem to have had much to do with determining how the situation became defined.

Among some of our men, another attitude antithetical to the anti-ideological one was detected. As opposed to the deep-seated distrust and distaste for political dogmas of any kind characteristic of most, there were some who had the impression that there must be some American dogma, with which they felt that they were unfortunately unfamiliar, which would provide the answer to those Communist arguments they themselves could not counter. But this, too, as can be readily seen, is a rather unassailable position. It will remain unassailable as long as its holders feel that they are politically ignorant (10, 11).

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There were widespread impressions after the Korean War that American prisoners in Korea and China had generally been easy marks for Chinese Communist indoctrination methods, popularly termed "brainwashing," and that many prisoners of war were converted into temporary or permanent communists by their captors. The Air Force study of its repatriated personnel endeavored to evaluate the actual significance of the effects of indoctrination attempts in terms of explicit criteria. These criteria related to attitudes and behavior that were relevant to responsibilities of the Air Force for its personnel.

On the basis of interviews and questionnaire responses of the 235 members of the Air Force who were repatriated, the following conclusions were reached:

1. Chinese Communist attempts to indoctrinate Air Force prisoners of

war were generally ineffective, in that these attempts:

- a. did *not* convert any Air Force personnel into communists or communist sympathizers;
- b. did *not* weaken the fundamental allegiance of these prisoners to the United States and American ideals;
- c. did *not* motivate prisoners to collaborate in such matters as giving intelligence, refraining from escape, or making propaganda;
- d. did *not* have major effects which could endure much beyond the period during which a man was being intensively indoctrinated in complete isolation from his fellows and from contact with the "outside world."

2. The ineffectiveness of indoctrination efforts is due in part to the following:

- a. prisoners who accepted some of the indoctrination content nonetheless responded selectively so that they accepted only material which caused no conflict with pre-existing beliefs and loyalties;
- b. prisoners were generally aware that a situation in which one is under coercion and able to hear the arguments of only one side is not one in which to make final decisions on the validity of ideological arguments;
- c. "acceptance" of doctrine at the intellectual level was not accompanied by emotional identification with that doctrine or any tendency to act in accordance with it;
- d. ignorance and lack of planning on the part of the Chinese Communists led to the

use of many materials and themes which produced extreme, negative reactions in the prisoners;

- e. characteristically American tendencies, including a distrust of political dogma, in general, and an aversion to communist dogma, in particular, made Air Force prisoners of war particularly resistant to communist indoctrination.

3. Testimony of returned prisoners of war regarding their own feelings of unpreparedness and inadequacy in dealing with communist arguments are interpreted here as reflections of some basic sources of strong resistance to indoctrination—in particular, of apolitical and “anti-political” attitudes, and of an unquestioning faith in American principles and in the United States.

One result of the official evaluation of the behavior of American prisoners in Korea was a recommendation that a program of political education was required to better prepare military personnel to resist indoctrination efforts in the event of capture (20). The conclusions of this study suggested that such a program would have to overcome serious gaps in the political information and understanding of most personnel, if it were to equip men to deal effectively with Communist indoctrination content at an intellectual and philosophical level. In approaching such an objective, the interpretations in this paper indicate that an ill-conceived program might actually undermine some of the important bases of resistance most personnel already possess. Specifically, it was concluded that a program of political education might have negative consequences:

- (a) if it undermined the distrust most personnel have for any

dogma;

- (b) if it made persons feel that they “have the answer” in areas regarding which they remain relatively ignorant, despite instruction;
- (c) if it made men feel guilty about being apolitical.

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## SOCIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD DISCHARGED MENTAL PATIENTS

CHARLES D. WHATLEY

*University of Oklahoma*

This paper reports a study of socially unfavorable attitudes exhibited toward persons who have had a mental illness. It attempts to reveal some of the social factors associated with avoidance reactions toward recuperating patients, and to indicate some of the ways in which these reactions may affect post-hospital adjustment. Both lay and professional observers have pointed out that a lingering social stigma attaches to newly discharged patients, and that consequently their social relations often are characterized by social distance, distrust or denial of employment (5, p. 460). Such patterns of avoidance may constitute a type of social isolation which could have adverse effects on those confronted by it.

One of the implications of the social-isolation hypothesis used in etio-

logical studies is that the presence of intolerant, unfavorable attitudes in the community tends to increase the likelihood of relapse and rehospitalization. Although this study will not directly test this hypothesis, it will present evidence suggesting how such social factors may affect the post-hospital experience of discharged patients.

### RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The research is based on the assumption that the attitudes of other persons which impinge on discharged mental patients may be explored by means of an attitude scale. During the summer of 1956, a scale designed for this purpose was administered to a stratified sample of 2001 persons scattered throughout 17 parishes (counties) in Louisiana. The eight items composing the scale (see Table